

AN APPRAISAL AND CRITICISM WITH REGARD TO
THE NATURE AND THE DECADENCE OF 20TH
CENTURY LITERATURE AND SOCIETY IN THE
SELECTED WORKS OF INDIRA GOSWAMI

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2006-2008

**“THE FEMINIST CONCERN WITH REGARD TO
THE SOCIAL AND ETHICAL DECADENCE OF 20TH
CENTURY ASSAMESE SOCIETY IN THE
RELEVANT WORKS OF INDIRA GOSWAMI”**

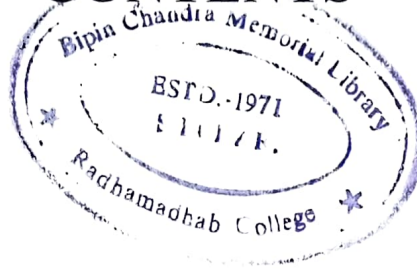


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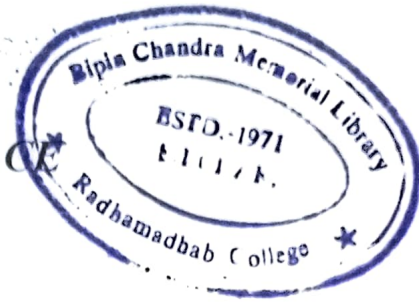
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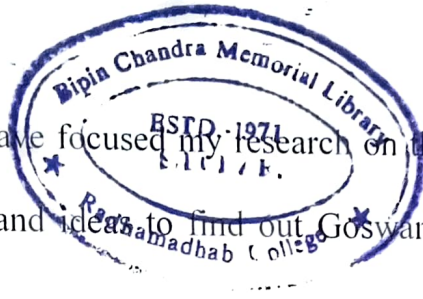
PREFACE



When I first came to read the twentieth century Assamese literature, I was inspired by Indira Goswami's captivating treatment of women's issues always against the solid system of the decaying social and ethical decadence in her works. I studied a few of her novels and a few short stories closely. Hence I undertook the task of writing this Minor Research paper on Indira Goswami's female concern against the backdrop of the crude social and ethical constrains.

In chapter one, I have made a brief survey of the history of the development of Assamese novel from its inception to the period before Indira Goswami with a view to providing a backdrop against which Goswami as a novelist may be assessed.

In chapter two, I have presented a brief sketch of Goswami's life and works believing that this will throw light on the development of Goswami's artistic and creative mind.



In chapter three, I have focused my research on the particularity of Goswami's feminist views and ideas to find out Goswami's distinctive feminist themes.

In chapter four, I have discussed a few relevant works of Goswami to show the degenerating ethical and social modes of twentieth century Assamese society against which she has projected the subordination of her female characters.

In chapter five, I have presented the final findings of my research on Goswami's selected works.

Finally, it is my proud privilege to express my deepest sense of gratitude to U G C (N E R O) for allowing me to conduct the research project and supporting me offering useful research grant.

Arundhati Dutta Choudhury



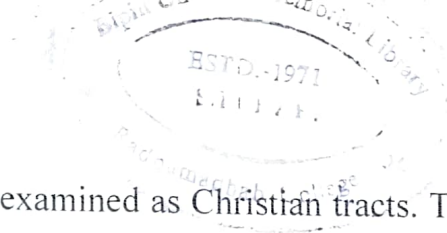
A Brief History Of Assamese Novel Before Indira Goswami

In this dissertation I would seek to examine a few novels and short stories of noted Assamese novelist Dr. Indira Goswami (b. **1942**) particularly set in Assam in order to find out what innovations she has introduced in the novels and short stories both thematically and stylistically in order to present her feminist point of view at the backdrop of the social and ethical decadence of Assam in the 20th century. The novels and short stories written in by Indira from the beginning to 1970's, 80's and 90's are outstandingly different from the novels and short stories written in Assamese language from the beginning to 1970's. To ascertain and asses the novelty of Indira Goswami's theme and technique in her writings, it would be useful for us to briefly survey the history of Assamese novel from the inception to the 1970's. It would be wise and enlightening if in the first chapter of this research paper I present a synoptic exegesis of the development of Assamese novel before Indira's emergence on the Assamese literary scene.



Since Assamese novel in translated version in the mid 19th century, I will present the history of Assamese novel for about one hundred years since 1877. During the said period of one hundred years many Assamese novelists emerged and numerous Assamese novels appeared. Since the main thrust of this Minor Research Project is laid on the novels and short stories of Indira Goswami set in the locale of Assam, I will restrict my exposition of the history of the development of Assamese novel only to chapter one. As the period to be covered is a large one, I will make my sketch of the development of Assamese novel before Indira a brief and synoptic one. I shall highlight only the outstanding novelists and their works, putting more emphasis on traits and tendencies in the history of Assamese novel.

In 1877 A. K. Garnia (b. 1845) translated a Bengali novel Alokeshi Beshyar Bishay by Miss M. E. Leslie. In 1877 Garnia published Kamalakanta. She translated Fulmani and Karuna too by Mrs. Mulan. Thus the Baptist publications that formed the initial structure of Assamese narrative tales in this region were mainly translations, which in turn highlighted the greatness of the Christian religious faith. The first Assamese novels essentially religious in character generated less fictional characteristics in subject



matters and duly can be examined as Christian tracts. The American Baptist missionaries by establishing the first printing press and publishing the first monthly periodical *Arunoday* in 1864 spread Christianity in the form of novels, fictional narratives and gave the Assamese mental horizon a just exposure heretofore unknown and taught the people a sense of self-estimation and an urge to adore the past with its culture and tradition.< But as it was not possible for them to discover with intimate description the strange and various shortcomings of the Indian society likewise the deep-rooted intention of teaching morals and the subtle desire of conversion kept them away from searching the fluid reality of contemporary novels.

In the last decade of the 19th century the educated Assamese youths coming across the influence of English language and literature and to a large extent Bengali literature acquired an imaginative vision to asses the outside world which in turn was implemented in the origin of Assamese novel in the Assamese soil.

Padmabati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927) in 1880 published *Sudharmar Upakhyan*. Without going deep into the complexities of characterization her three sets of fiction stretched a continuation of the fictional development and

they along with Hemchandra Baruah's *Bahire Rang Chang Bhitare Kuabhaturi* were written in the line of establishing the foundation of Assamese novel.

In the same period appeared Padmanath Gohain Baruah's two novels- *Bhanumati*(1891) and *Padum Kuwari*. In both the novels, the settings exploit Muamoria Mutiny and the Maan invasion. The historical focus of the novels was a noticeable standpoint which again for the first time had shown an altogether new approach in setting novels on the glimmer and glories of the past.

In 1895 Rajanikanta Bardoloi with his *Miri Jiyari* established, in real sense of the term, the actual journey of Assamese novel. *Miri Jiyari* based on the tribal life in the bank of the river Suwansiri is a complete and realistic novel. The river attains the status of a spatial character and the author meticulously depicts the cultural intricacies of the Miri tribe in Assam. Influenced by the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott, Bardoloi processed through his fictions to trace out the Assamese historical facts during the Maan aggression in Assam. His other chief publications are *Manumati* (1900), *Dandua Droha* (1909), *Radha Rukminir Ran*, *Rangili*(1925), *Nirmal*

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Bhakat), *Rahdoi Ligiri*(1930), *Tamreshwarir Mandir*(1936) and the series of tales known as *Khamba and Thoibi*. As it can be said in Bardoloi's writings there is a dominance of stereotype structural pattern, the conventional style of the development of romance and the description of social norms. Still an original belief and concept of Bardoloi has secured the life- stream of novels. Actually in Bardoloi's hand itself the Assamese historical novels have grown and developed. Mostly all the novels of Bardoloi are female oriented and the chief source of the plots executed is the bondage of romantic love between the romantic protagonists. Though the novelist has cherished more in the fulfillment of spiritual love rather giving it any material culmination, still his novels map around an easy balance between these two swings of love as a concept.

Besides the appearance of novelists like Hareshwar Sharma publishing *Kusumkumari* in 1899 and Lakshminath Bezbaruah publishing *Padumkuwari* in 1905, the growth of Assamese fiction experienced remarkable force with the emergence of novelist like Dandinath Kalita who continued the tradition of historical novel from the early part of the 20th century. He published *Phool* in 1908. His second novel *Sadhana* has a critical treatment of society as its governing theme though his later compositions do not reflect his early

possibility upon novels like *Parichay*, *Abiskar*, (1950) and *Gana Biplab* (1951).

20th century also witnessed Daibachandra Talukdar writing problem fictions depicting nationalist movement, anti-drug activities in novels like *Dhuwali-Kuwali* (1922), *Apurna*, *Agneyagiri*, (19243), *Bidrohi* (1939), *Adarsha* Pith and such others.

Some other novelists writing in this period are Hiteswar Barbaruah *Malita* (1914), Saratchandra Goswami *Panipath* (1930), Santiram Das *Bairagi* (1921), Snehalata Bhattacharya *Bina* (1926), Harinarayan Dutta Baruah *Chitra Darshan* (1940), Dinanath Sharma *Usha* , Kamaleshwar Chaliha *Baligarat*.

Besides the original compositions in the 20th century a few translation works were also composed as a new vogue of introducing foreign subject matters into the structure of Assamese literature and in the vernacular tongue. A few examples can be cited like Thaneshwar Hazarika's *Din Dukhi* (1962), Lakhweshwar Sharma's *Matri* and *Pompey's Pralay Kahini* or Santiram Das's *Milan Mandir*.

Modern Assamese story too, is inherited from the western literary tradition. The pioneer of this trend in the history of Assamese literature is Lakshminath Bezbaruah.

After 1940's Assamese literature followed more or less the early trends and tendencies. The demise of the most productive and promising leaders of literature caused a lamentable vacuum in the field of not only Assamese novel but also in the general literary scenario. Though most of the periodical publications stopped publishing due to the death of a major number of literary editors, the newspapers and literary periodicals that continued even after 1940's were 'Abahan', 'Bahi', and 'Surabhi'. The second world war stunted through its brutaslity the spontaneous growth and movement of literary productions of this period. After the havoc caused by the World war II, Assamese novel sprouted again in novel form shape. The post-war novel took a governing social note in its overall structure and subject matter, consciously avoiding the earlier Romantic conventions like glorifying the past by writing historical narratives or choosing story-line based on love and romance. The novelist's canvas broadly explored diverse problematic like

the human drama in villages and township and the social construction there in.

The social backdrop initiated by the new generation of writers gave birth to a new intellectual insight that invariably looked into the general system and searched the intricate social issues and voiced forth a social tone in their novels. To introduce a few novelists writing in this line the list should begin with Bina Baruah writing under the pseudonym Birinchi Kumar Baruah at the backdrop of Indian National Movement one of his masterpieces *Jibanar Batat* (1945). Taking another pseudonym called Birinchi Kumar Baruah he portrayed through his *Seuji Patar Kahini* (1958) the social background of the lives of tea-garden labourers and the garden people.

Mohammad Piyar's contributions to the post-war period of Assamese novel are *Priti Upahar*(1947), *Sangram*(1948), *Maraha Phool*, *Jiban Nair Janji* (1949) and *Herua Swarga*(1952) and such others. In 1959 he translated Tolstoy's *Anna Karanina* as *Haifen*. Prafulla Datta Goswami's *Kenchha Patar Kapani* deserves mention for its meaningful dialogue and characterization. The post-war socio-economic scenario is again artistically presented in the novels of Hitesh Deka's *Ajir Manuh* (1952),

NatunPath(1956), *Bharaghar* (1957), *Mati Kar* (1958), *Ayetu Jiban* (1963), *Achal Manuh* (1963), *Bairi Manuh* (1967), *Jiban Sanghat* (1967) and such others.

Radhika Mohan Goswami portrays the conflicts of emerging social realities through his idealistic protagonist in his novel *Chanakya* (1954) And the conflict between Assamese domestic life and the growing complications of modernity in *Ba Marali* (1958). Saiyad Malik rising from the stature of short story writer to a novelist produced a few intensely social novels like *Rathar Chakari Ghure*, *Banjui* (1958), *Chabighar*(1959), *Surajmukhir Swapna*, *Jiyajurir Ghat* (1960), *Anya Akash Anya Tara* (1962), *Adhar Shila* (1967), *AghariAtmar Kahini* (1967) etc.

Another stupendous novelist with possibility Jogesh Das shows the universal conflict between decadent social morality and eternal human law in *Dawar Aru Nai* (1955). Two more novels written by him are *Jonakir Jui* (1956) and *Nirupay Nirupay* (1963) Dinanath Sharma chiefly translated Keniut Hamsen's *Growth of the Soil* as *Mati Aru Manuh*. He re-explored the vital connection between soil and human being in his famous narrative *Nadai*

(1956). Some other works by Sharma are *Sangram* (1954), *Shanti* (1961), *Nabarun* etc.

The 1970s witnessed a handful of authors with tremendous possibility exploring the psychology of social intricacies of Assamese life through characters, situations and the gaps within. Homen Borgohain announced his entry into the field of Assamese novel publishing *Subala* (1963). His illustration of the conflict between generations begins with *Tantric* (1967), *Timirtirtha* (1973), and *Haladhiya Charaye Bau Dhan Khay* and the theme achieves its momentum in *Pita Putra* (1975).

If not looking back to the past, the treatment of restricted locale with their specific concerns once again becomes a realistic issue of Assamese novels. Nabakanta Baruah a prolific Assamese author establishes the setting of Kapilia life style in *Kapilipariya Sadhu* (1952), and in the beginning of the 1980's he tales a remarkable story narrative with historical and semi-historical details in *Kakadeutar Haar* (1972).

On the other hand another notable female novelist Nirupama Bargohain portrays an original way of stretching out of the documentation of life in *Hai Nadi Nirabadhi* (1963), and *Iparar Ghar, Hiparar Ghar* (1978).

Once again the socio-political turmoil of the recent past attains a vibrant dimension and featured as objective co relative to the present day social reality in noted Assamese novelist Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's narratives. He narrates the events of a single day in *Rajpathe Ringiyay*(1957), and the present decaying condition of rural life by the increasing pressure of new civilization in *Aai* (1958). His *Iyaruigingam* is set in the backdrop of the Tangkhul Nagas residing in Manipur during the troublesome era of that period when the Tanghuls were harassed by the separatists group called 'Fijo'. Likewise *Sataghni* was written in the backdrop of Chinese aggression in 1964. The Anti – British national awareness is the central theme of *Mrityunjay* (1969). The labour movement occurred in Digboi during 1938-39 is the theme of one of his most promising novels, *Pratipad*. Besides he also wrote novels like *Ranga Megh*, *Ballari*, *Daini* and such others.

Chandraprakash Saikia handles out citizen and urban theme in his works like *Mandakranta* (1960) and *MeghMallar* (1963). Sasikia has confronted many social arguments in such novels like *Uttar Kaal* and *Janmantar* (1978). Padma Barkotoki's novels on the other hand trace the way to destroy the illusion of life through an analysis of human psychology in novels like *Manar Dapun* (1959), *Khabar Bichari* (1960). He has realistically treated the theme of history in *Kunu Khed Nai* (1978). Laksminandan Bora has emerged into the field of modern Assamese novel with new possibilities. Some of his novels are *Nishar Pukhuri* (1962) and *Ganga Chilanir Pakhire* (1963). He has sketched a picture of the movement of citizen expulsion in his last work *Akou Saraighat* (1981).

Medini Choudhury's *Bandukabehar* (1976) is set on the life of Saint Madhabdev, a symbol of humanism while the theme of degenerating socio-economic life is treated in *Tat Nadi Achil* (1977).His *Ferangadau* is sketched on the life of Bishnuprasad Rabha.

Debendra Acharya wrote two successful narrative fictions- *Annya Yug* *Annya Purush*(1971), and *Kalpurush* (1976). His third and last novel is *Jangam* (1982).

In the last decade of the 20th century the rapid growth of novels and novelists has transformed the earlier scenario. After scoring the historical, romantic and socio-historical perspectives in the earlier decades, the last decades of the 20th century Assamese novels seem to be based mainly on Social, individualistic, psycho-critical, historical and socialist theme and perspective. As one critic meditates “ historical novel is the outcome of romantic outlook. The present age is an age of social realism.....In the post-independent period authors used to achieve a kind of self satisfaction roaming around the ancient traditional past...”. But after the achievement of the country’s freedom the authors are more concerned depicting the socio-cultural life around while writing historical novels.

During the 70’s And 80’s mostly all novels deal with social themes. And the social narratives are bound to explore the psychological or the individual characteristics ;and in its turn an individualistic narrative examines the psychological tendencies of characters. On the other hand psychological novels in its extreme explores dimensions of Freudian and sexual intricacies. With such wide variety of scope and material the last decade of the 20th century Assamese novel saw a rapid growth of novels and novelists

contributing to the field of Assamese literature. Some such contributions are Sureshchandra Goswami's *Sat Rangar Natun Kareng*, Premadhar Rajkhowa's *Bhular Sam Adhi*, Tilak Das's *Shilpi*, Mathura Deka's *Devagiri*, Durgeshawr Kalita's *Bidhaba* and such others.

Against this perspective of Assamese novel, Indira Goswami's emergence as a novelist marked the development of a new direction in Assamese novel. She spearheaded a departure from the historical, the romantic and the realistic trends in Assamese novel. Goswami introduced the woman-protagonist in her novels and analysed the concerns of Assamese women in her works. With Goswami's appearance on the scenario of the Assamese novel, many women writers turned their attention to the exposition of women in the male dominated society.

This brief account of the development of Assamese novel from the beginning to the period when Indira Goswami emerged as a novelist will enable us to assess and evaluate the achievement of Goswami as an Assamese novelist and her unique contribution in the field of Assamese novel.

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SECOND CHAPTER

Indira Goswami: Her Life And Works

In chapter one, I have given a brief account of Assamese novel from the beginning to 1970s when Indira Goswami's first novel appeared. This account gives us a backdrop against which Goswami's achievement in her novels may be assessed. However, we may require some information and data about Goswami's life and works in general that would help us in placing her novels relevant for the Minor Research Project in her total achievement of championing female issues as an Assamese novelist. Hence in chapter two, I will briefly dwell on the life and works of Goswami in general. Since all her works are not within the purview of this research paper, I will give a mere chronological account of her novels and other works.

Mostly known by her pen-name Mamoni Roysom Goswami, Dr. Indira Goswami was born on 14th November, 1942 to a traditional Vaishnabite family of Assam which owned a satra (monastery). "The Satradhikars (heads of the satra) were held in high esteem by their tenants

who were also disciples. The Adhikars were supposed to be the moral and spiritual mentors of their people.....Indira was raised in one such satra,"1 of South Kamrup Assam.

Goswami's father was a teacher in Cotton college and also the superintendent of one of its hostels. Goswami was born in the Superintendent's house located on the banks of the river Dighalipukhuri. She was the daughter of late Umakanta Goswami and Ambika Devi, the second wife of Umakanta Goswami. Previously Goswami's father was the principal of Murarichand college in Sylhet, now in Bangladesh and later became the State's Education Director. Goswami received her education both at Pine Mount school in Shillong and Tarini Charan Girls' School, Guwahati. She completed her graduation from Cotton college and did her post-graduation from Guwahati University. Goswami pursued her research work on *Ramayana*, the great Indian epic, for her Ph.D research in the institute of Vrindaban. She served as the Professor in the department of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi.

From her early childhood Mamoni Roysom Goswami liked writing. She attempted some tasks such as translations from Assamese to

English and vice versa. When she was only at her seventh standard she composed an essay which was published in *Natun Asamiya* edited by Kirtinath Hazarika. She published her first poem in *Ramdhenu* in 1960- namely "Boga Purnima". But as the author herself meditates:

I liked the prose form better, and that is why I chose it. It was by a natural impulse that I turned from poetry to prose.²

Goswami also states:

Writing is in my blood, in my veins. If I stop I will die of suffocation. Without my pen I will die...With my writings I am free as a bird, to fly anywhere to be anyone, to understand anything.³

As Goswami expresses in her autobiography *Adha Lekha Dastabej* :

Early in life I thought I would be a writer. My experience of life and things was yet limited and vague, still I started writing and tried to render sensibility in words my perceptions of life however inadequate.

After 1956, Goswami's family after her father's retirement from service moved from Shillong to Guwahati. Goswami's trauma during her stay in Guwahati with a growing disturbed consciousness of femalehood deserves immense priority with regard to her life – sketch and career as an author as it relentlessly exposed her selfhood to a wider horizon of female subordination that eventually enhances her artistic sensibility in different fictional fronts.

During 1960's Goswami had been suffering from deep depression and a sense of futility. All the time she was engrossed with anxieties and dilemmas and her vision of selfhood did not receive any co-ordinating reciprocation from the outer world. She had to undergo the conflict between the societal acceptance of a beautiful and unmarried girl as a mere physical entity and her own inner urge to stand as a female with human scopes and dignity. Goswami recollects :

“Years later my favourite novelist Abdul Malik, dedicated a novel *Hahire Chokulu Dhaki* (Hiding Tears in Smiles) to me. I do not know – had Sir divined my state of mind.”⁴

After her father's demise Goswami's frightening sense of despair intensified and gradually she was swept away by a thick tunnel of despair and melancholy. A strange feeling of isolation enveloped her total existence and she seriously started thinking about physical annihilation. She obsessed with death attempted her suicidal attempt on a certain day in 1961 and had to be admitted to the Gauhati Civil Hospital remaining several days unconscious. This attempt nonetheless led her face stark social lashes that even showed it's finger against her moral character and Goswami recollects people's saying :

“She must have been with child...had an affair with somebody...otherwise why should she attempt suicide.”⁵

Goswami as she herself admits had no lovers and admirers; and at the aftermath of the trauma of the possible physical loss, she was involved with a person who eventually died in unnatural circumstances.

The next phase of Goswami's life was another projection of female subordination that she witnessed undergoing the pressure of superstitions and supernatural means that her family members led into to have a healthy

transformation within her. She had been bantered by astrological warnings by tantriks and one of them said :

“Better to cut her into two and set afloat in the river than give her in marriage.”⁶

She had been declared ominous as her stars indicated evil anticipations. She had to offer worship to Mother Vagala (a manifestation of goddess Kali) and the propiation was accompanied with animal sacrifice on her behalf. The ritual left a scary impact in the mind of Goswami as she never could accept the bloody act which left nothing but a sensation of guilt and embarrassment. Later Goswami’s young memories were rejuvenated again while she nurtured the theme of animal sacrifice as a succinct subject for her novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*.

Though she had been persistently perturbed by the continuous persuasion of her mother with the prospect of her marriage, Goswami gradually started a regaining her strength of mind. Goswami boldly declares:

“ The world I set foot in after my brush with death was a different world...But on my way back from the threshold of death, I had taken a decision . “I will live life and what’s more, live it will.”⁷

In early April 1962, Indira met Madhavan Roysom Iyenger, an engineer from Mysore while he was in Guwahati working for the Hindustan Construction at Saraighat Project. During that period Goswami started her time to literature and wrote a number of short stories. She also worked for a brief period as a teacher in a missionary school. The intimacy with Madhaban continued for three years. Madhaban was sternly rejected by the Gosain family and as the marriage with Madhaban sank deep into a distant project, Indira lost her restraint being continuously teased by lovers and her mothers incessant quest for her marriage. Being frantic Indira impulsively took a preposterous decision of marrying one of her lovers suddenly and fell on a dungeon of mistaken judgment. Though by now she was legally contracted to that person, she felt no love for him. The news of the civil marriage spread like wild fire and the person too became desperate to obtain Indira by any means. Once again Goswami had to appear before a magistrate who declared the marriage null and void and Goswami had to sign on “ annual section 11 of the Civil Marriage Act.”⁸

In the year 1965, Goswami obtained her post-graduation degree and married Madhaban according to Vedic rites. She stepped into another world soon and with Madhaban left Guwahati for his work-site Gujarat. From the year 1965 to 1967 Goswami along with her husband moved along with her husband various aqueduct projects situated from Gujarat to Kashmir. In the year 1967 Madhaban was killed in an accident at his work place at Suina.

Goswami's sudden widowhood all of a sudden led her back to Assam. Living among overwhelming depression, agony and unending loneliness, Goswami passed a little period in Goalpara Sainik School where she served as a teacher. Those were the most terrible days when Goswami faced her personal traumas as widow both because of the sudden conventional dictums imposed on her to follow and for the hazards which she had to overcome being a tender aged young beautiful woman.

Soon after Goswami left Goalpara and prepared to join her teacher late Dr. Upendrachandra Lekharu who inspired her to start her Ph.D research on Ramayana at the Oriental Research Institute, in Vrindavan.

In 1970, Goswami received her call letter for appearing before an interview against her application for the post of lecturer in the department of Modern Indian Languages in Delhi University. In the same year in the month of October Goswami received her appointment letter from Delhi University. On 2nd November, 1970, Goswami joined as a lecturer in the department of Modern Indian Languages in Delhi University.

Indira Goswami has written nearly twenty five novels and several hundreds of short stories. Her novels and short stories have been translated into many Indian and foreign languages.

Her first collection of short stories *Chinaki Maram* was published in 1962. Her second collection of short stories *Kaina* was published in 1966. Her next collection *Hriday Ek Nadir Naam* appeared in 1989. In 1998 appeared *Mamoni Roysom Goswami Priya Galpa* and in 2000 she published the edition of her *Nirbachita Galpa*.

Goswami's first novel *Chenabar Srot* was published in 1972. The novel portrays the sufferings of the poor workers employed in the construction of a bridge on the basis of her personal experience at the construction site.⁹ Her

second novel *Nilkanthi Braja* was published in 1972, translated in English as *The Shadow of the Dark God*. The novel based on the authors own experience while staying at Vrindavan Narrates the plight and exploitation of the widows and spinsters, “their sorrows and agony, their desires and frustrations, as she witnessed them at Vrindavan.”¹⁰ As Goswami herself meditates upon the novel based on Brajabhumi:

“*Nilkanthi Braja* is based on the experience of my own life at Vrindavan. This city itself has become a kind of character of the novel. ...I was shocked by the condition of widows, mostly Bengali women, left to die in this holy city and wrote about them in this novel.”....All this became a part of my mental agony and it poured out of my pen almost spontaneously in the novel and formed a portrayal of Vrindavan, as seen and felt through my senses, during the period 1969 to 1970.¹¹

Here this should be noted that””Indira is probably the first Indian novelist to take up this theme and reveal the cruelty, violence and pathos that surround the lives of these helpless women.”¹²

Goswami's third novel *Ahiran* was published in 1980. Based on the life of a group of labourers engaged in the construction of an aqueduct on the river Ahiran in Madhya Pradesh "the significance of a novel that carries such a message of hope against the cruel settings of strangled humanism and humanity in the modern age can not be gainsaid."

In 1980, Goswami published her notable fictional work *Mamare Dhara Tarawal* (*Rusted Sword*) which was awarded with the Sahitya Academy Award for 1982. Here too the narrative is based on a long – drawn strike by the labourers of a construction company building an aqueduct over the Sai river in Rae Bareilly.

Her masterpiece *Daantal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah* (*The Moth Eaten Saddle of the Tusker*) was published in 1988. The sprawling Satra of her forefathers in South Kamrup inspired her to take the gradually degenerating realities abounding in such Satras and Goswami besides documenting the causes of ruin of such typical monastic institution of Assam in recent years due to opium trade and the conflict between the Satradhikars and the sharecroppers, also depicts the "grim situation of Assamese widows" and their horrible exploitation by the patriarchal society.

In 1986 a collection of a story and two novels *Sanskar, Udaybhanur Charitra Aru Ityadi* appeared and in 1991 Goswami published another collection of her writings *Ishwari Jakhami Jatri Ityadi*.

Her autobiographical narrative *Adha Lekha Dastabej* (*Half Written Autobiography*) appeared in 1998. As Himanshu Joshi meditates:

“ Indira Goswami’s book has all the makings of a magnificently disarming autobiography. It stands out as a singularly frank, embarrassingly honest and sincere life story free from the usual celebratory, often self justifying primness....15

Goswami published *Tej Aru Dhulire Dusharita Pristha* (*Blood Stained Pages*) in 1994 at the backdrop of Delhi Riot after the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi. Her first collection of novels appeared in 1998, and her last fictional work until now, *Chinnamaster Manuhtu* (*The Man from Chinnamasta*) appeared in 2001.

Besides her fictional and semi-fictional works, Goswami also published a biographical piece on noted Indian scholar Dr. Kamala Ratnam,

Mahiyashi Kamala in 19 and her Research work *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra* appeared in 1996. She also translated a few books from Hindi, Urdu, Panjabi, Bengali, and Malayalam-like *Premchandar Chuti Galpa* (1975), *Adha Ghanta Samay* (1978), *Jatak Katha and Kalam* (1996).

Goswami has been profusely translated into different languages like- English, Hindi, Nepali, Telegu, Kannar, Bengali, and her stories have been duly anthologized in various collections and journals like *Modern Indian Short Stories*, Vol. 4, *Indian Literature*, No. 112, No. 131, *Samadarshi*, *Indian Literature*, *Woman*, *Samakalin Bharatiya Sahitya* and such others. She has profusely contributed to the field of Assamese language and literature publishing research papers in sundry national and international journals.

After joining in the department of Modern Indian Languages in Delhi University, in 1971, Goswami received her doctoral degree on Ramayani literature in 1973. During 1988-93 she remained a member of the Advisory Board of Sahitya Akademi (Assamese). During 1990-95 she served as a member of Bharatiya Lekhak Santha, New Delhi. In 1998 she participated as a resource person at the Intrnationa Seminar on Ramayani Literature held in

Trinidad, Spain, 1998. She was held as a resource person in the second centenary festival of Mirja Ghalib jointly convened by Urdu Akademi and Sahitya Akademi. In 1999, in Indian International center, she was acclaimed as a resource person on the occasion of International Hindi Seminar.

Goswami's literary and academic career has been crowned with different rewards and honours she received from various corners of the country and the world.

In 1974, Goswami received award from Manash Chaturshadi Samiti, Delhi. In 1983 she was awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *The Rusted Sword* and two other novels. In 1988 Goswami was honoured with Assam Sahitya Sabha Award. She received Bharat Nirman Award in 1989. She was awarded with Souhardya Award by Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sanstha, Luknow in 1992. She received Katha award in 1993. In 1996 Goswami received Kamalkumari Foundation Award. Goswami was highly acclaimed with International Jury Award for the film *Adahya* directed by Dr. Santana Bardoloi based on her novel *Daantal hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*. In 2001, Dr. Indira Goswami was awarded with the nation's highest literary tribute, the Jyapith Award. In 2002 she was offered D.lit by Rabindra

Bharati University. In the same year she was honoured with Joymoti Award by the Ahom Court.

Moreover, Goswami has received innumerable awards, honours, and tributes by various organizations, literary foundations, universities, etc.

She has also made a wide traveling, participating in different seminars and workshops around the world, visiting countries and places like Japan, America, Mauritius, Pakistan, Indonesia, Trinidad, Thailand and other places of South East Asia.

Thus, Goswami has become a major Assamese public figure. This brief survey of the major events in Goswami's life and a chronological account of her publications give us an idea about the importance of her achievement as a Assamese novelist, short story writer, and a cultural activist. They also indicate the originality of her personality and her literary achievement. Against this overall account of her achievement as an author, I will set and analyze her female concerns in the next chapter.

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THIRD CHAPTER

Indira Goswami's Feminist Views

In the preceding chapters I have presented a brief survey of the history of Assamese novel before Indira Goswami and then a brief outline of Goswami's life and her publications in order to use them as a background to the study of her preoccupations with the women's issues as manifested in her novels and short stories. However, before I proceed to examine the novels and other fictional writings, I wish to highlight Goswami's opinions about women's issues. Hence in chapter three , I will present Goswami's views about woman and feminism.

In her novels and other fictional writings, Indira Goswami selects women as the protagonists and explores their psychological and social problems related to their search for identity. Though Goswami deals with the women and their concerns, she points out in several places during her interviews that she has not taken upon herself the task of projecting the ideas of feminism that swept through England, and Europe in the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

Hence, in this chapter I will try to find out through an analysis of whatever she has said about the concerns of women, what really constitutes Goswami's feminism or her attitudes towards the problematic of women and her concerns specially against the backdrop of the twentieth century Assamese society.

Indira Goswami explicates the women's issue, answering a question regarding the position of woman among the feminist feelings, movements and sensations of nearly a century, in her following observations:

“The feminist course of thought, I suppose, is now at a state of importance. It seems even to indicate the future of woman. However, it is never the same among different socio-economic classes. Feminism has spread mainly through the cities. It may be on its zenith in some town areas, which may be surrounded by such country areas where life for woman is only pain, oppression, and gloom...The woman of Assam has not got such a course of progress....Given chances of being educated and self-reliant, the woman could have been relieved a lot from these various torments.”¹

Goswami has discovered her female characters in the midst of realistic social juncture where they have been suffering under restraints and chaotic complains. It is somewhat difficult to examine Goswami's female projections individually because they are too socially constructed. They are always brutally attacked by time, society and human beings. Though the author remains inconclusive about the ultimate standing of her resolute, rebellious female heroines, she seems to be more firm on creating them able enough to voice forth their self-assertion. Such as, Goswami's feminist stand though to some extent reflects the Western feminist cult, still bears an indomitable spiritual energy to stand against the repressive social calamities. With such innovative and bold sensibility Goswami's first fiction *Chenabar Srote* characterizes two leading female characters-Soni and Raghama, though isolated for their unconventional existence fight against the scars of society by their unsurpassable mental and ethical strength.

Goswami, as she has answered to the question of her interrelatedness with her leading protagonists, always finds a personal kinship with her female characters. She bears a strong relationship with them as if they are the multifaceted dimensions of the author herself. Still she also feels for her female characters not always as a creator but also as a writer with

detachment. She deliberately ponders deep inside her characters always sensing a personal touch with them. About one of her leading protagonist ‘Saudamini’ in *Nilkanthi Braja*, Goswami meditates:

“In *Nilkanthi Braja*, the suffering of Saudamini kept me overwhelmed. I bestowed my own pains heartily on the character of ‘Saudamini’.²

Even replying to another question about her concern for female torments around, Goswami’s inherent participation in the agonies of her female characters presented in different narratives, who have been sketched out as much at the backdrop of a specific socio-ethical background as tremendously exploited by that vehemently dictating patriarchy. She speaks about the appalling condition of the ‘Radheswamis’ of Brajadham (Vrindavan) about whose precarious status as forsaken widows she has stated in her 1970s seminal composition, *Nilkanthi Braja* and whose plight she has found to remain assiduously grave even in her next visit to the place in the course of twenty years. Regarding the Assamese women though Goswami comprehends notes of change and progress, her voice remains

equally grave and conceiving the alarming situation of the Brahmin widows in the state. She meditates:

“And to Assam...but that of the widows of the Brahmins have not changed so. In the villages too, the state of the women is rather worse. Assam is undergoing some changes, perhaps, but it is very slowly.”³

In Goswami's another seminal fiction *Mamare Dhara Tarowal*, the novelist takes pain in sketching out the character of Narayani, the protagonist who is at the same time remorselessly exploited, helpless, forsaken and helpless and though at last she turns vengeful, she is bold and courageous to clear out her female space.

Besides her masterpiece, *Daantal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah* which will be analysed in the next chapter in details, Goswami's feminist standpoint can also be emphasized in her other fictional or semi-fictional works like *Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha* and *Adha Lekha Dastabej*. The former written at the backdrop of national political turmoil symbolically projects the author's own restless psyche torn apart by her dual relationship with both the Sikh driver called Santokh Singh and another of her admirer, Brigadier Nagiyal

and here too the author as a self-drawn character transcends the series of corporal arena of desire and lust and stands bold with her self-own self assertiveness. In her semi-fictional autobiography, the author acknowledges her stages of becoming a woman like-girlhood, female hood, her youth and marital life, widowhood, and most importantly her experience of an isolated Indian woman after becoming a widow. She has frankly unfolded the social cross- currents against which she has to justify her existence and female selfhood. Thus this brief overview of the female characters in some of the writer's representative narratives has established Goswami's feminist attitude as an outburst of the rigid patriarchal society and so her feminism may be coined as cultural feminism.

Goswami has her own views about different 'isms' including the basic theory of feminism. She though does not believe in any set, stereotype political manifesto called feminism as such as a restricted female outcry, she inauspiciously declares her own points of view:

“....even the original feminism sometimes makes me dubious.

It has helped a lot in the uplift of the state of woman,... and I admire it ...my sense of experience have given me another, separate view. Feminism is

founded on the woman's thirst for freedom. A woman's concern about her own torments, the care taken so as not to be extorted, the learning to demand her rights: these, I think, show the basic shape of feminism. It is basically the struggle for the enhancement of the woman's conditions..."⁴

And it is a fact that Goswami perceiving the plight of women relentlessly negotiates between her individuality as an author and the innumerable oppression of women in the patriarchal society. Crossing the hazards and ordeals of traditional family oriented customs and cultural taboos- Goswami faced multitudes of female experiences as an Indian woman- but her awareness of her own victim hood came mostly after her fatal suicidal attempt in 1961. As Amrita Pritam meditates:

“And then a time came when she had to face something much worse than the travails of the baptism of fire. It was the hell fire of society...Then it suddenly dawned upon this pure virgin girl, this beautiful girl, what kind of world she would have to live at all...But it was certainly a fateful moment when Nature herself made her take her first step towards metamorphosis. She picked up her pen to creative writing.”⁵

Born in a traditional Vaishnavite family of Assam, which owned a satra and raised in such atmosphere of orthodox custom bound society, Goswami from her early maidenhood availed the vantage point to watch the traumas society can inflict particularly upon women in its brutal ruthlessness. While recollecting the past going through the diaries of her deceased father , serving as a teacher in Goalpara Sainik School, Goswami recollected the sufferings and miseries of women whom she used to know living in Amranga Satra during her younger days. She mentions some of them as completely wretched, abominably exploited after becoming widow by the patriarchy- how they were deprived of their lands too, sexually molested by the Govt. officers and finally turned into beggars. Goswami also recollected the system of keeping maids as properties in their own satra. Goswami felt the miseries of such maids who were helpless females and often survived becoming old much like old vultures in some corner of the so called monastic establishment. Thus the sufferings of marginalized women, particularly the forlorn widows, or the wretched maids who never received any redress from the towering society under whose umbrella they lived or whom they served endlessly, is one of her most exercised field of documenting female exploitation. In this context Ranavir Rangra justly states:

“Indira Goswami is known mainly for her concentration on the tragic plight of our women in a repressive world of suffocating socio-religious conventions set for them by the male-oriented system, though she uses a wider canvas in her writings to enrich them with many socio-cultural and economic issues concerning the lower and down-trodden strata.”⁶

Besides marooning her female characters-widows as well as persecuted females in different novels and short stories against rigid socio-ethical inflictions set upon them and dragging them through the wraths of norms, Goswami has penetrated deep into the realities of female concerns of the 20th century Assamese society as seen by her in different life galleries starting from Satra dominated places to places like Brajadham Vrindavan or various corners and alleys of the country and the world.

The traumatic end of her conjugal life instantly equipped Goswami to come face to face with a life which was harsh, inert and full of hazards for a woman to survive. Her early widowhood was as much a scope to her as a life searching experience to study the issues and concerns of widows as specific phases of female realities in Indian perspective. Her teenage love of creative writing grew into an intense passion and a persistent effort to asses

her identity as a being compassionate to the social realities around. Goswami has undoubtedly perceived the levels of exploitation that a widow, rural or Brahmin, in the perspective of Assam or outside the locale suffers as observed by Bhupinder Zutshi:

“Indian widows especially Hindu widow is considered as inauspicious since ancient times...However, there are great variations in the life of an Indian widow depending on state, caste, economic and social level, education and whether the family is rural or urban...

Upon widowhood, most widows in rural India are subject to economic decline, social isolation and related deprivation. They are restricted about how and where they live , and in terms of inheritance, remarriage, employment and the kind social support they can receive from relatives and the community. An intensive field study conducted in seven states in India, shows that the Indian widow tends to be a highly marginalized person.”⁷

Goswami picks up widows from her varied fields of living experience. The widows of Amranga Satra in *Daantal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*-Durga, Giribala, and Saru Gosain, the widow Damayanti of her short length novel “The Offspring” or the widows of *Nilkanthi Braja* and all the emaciated

widows widespread among her narratives speak the same tales of unbearable pain and agony, the sense of harassment morally or ethically inflicted upon them at different scores of life.

Goswami impressing most of her alarming female protagonists on real-life characters whom she has come across as marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the society, also maintains the same sense of victimization in the context of female writers in the perspective of India. She finds women writers often discriminated against. She states:

“...I have seen in general that Indian women writers have not been given due recognition in some of the important representative works on Indian literature. I have also seen exploitation of women to a great extent in my own life.”⁸

Such as Goswami does a kind of justice by sketching female characters and defining the true female realities in the context of the patriarchal Indian society. As Goswami proclaims, exploitation is the ultimate social tribulation that does not spare woman at whatever position she may stand. If in *Daantal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*, she unfolds the terrible exploitation

of the Brahmin widows, she has narrated about the emotional and sexual exploitation of female labourers in different construction site-settings which she has witnessed personally and documented in her novels like *Ahiron* or *Mamare Dhara Tarowal*.

Besides negotiating female questions with her bold narratives, Goswami also speaks of ways through which the social wrongs on women to some extent can be undone. Though the social change regarding women's status throughout the country is noticeably slow as in the case of the Radheswamis in Vrindavan or the status of the Brahmin widows of Assam, she sees a ray of progress that can be achieved through collective, organized female stands. She replying to an interview states:

“The woman's organizations could have done something in the matter of these wrongs. They could have organized some missions into the remote country areas and thus could have greatly rectified the viewpoints of men. In Assam there are some active groups like the ‘Lekhika Santha’ and the ‘Lekhika Samaroh’. They may take help of the government and attempt to fight the evils such as lack of learning, superstitions, the chains of strict rules over women etc. in villages. The writer too, can thus analyze the wrongs and

appeal to the common man to fight such problems, and thus shake the corrupt system.”⁹

With particular implications to women and social relatedness, “women in the Third World face multiple challenges, among them poverty, unemployment, limited access to land, legal and social discrimination in many forms, sexual abuse and other forms of violence.”¹⁰

Goswami tries to focus attention on and give a term and platform to an emerging approach to study the female issues in her fictional works- a voice of Assamese as well as Indian women studying their torments specifically in the context of specified social background. Goswami’s treatment of feminism has an acute social fabric, making her works studies of society studying the variegated interpretations of female hood.

Correlating with Goswami’s attitude of feminism “ Raymond William’s famous notion of ‘culture’ as lived experience is helpful. William argues for an understanding of culture not simply as a set of habits or traditions, but as a way to comprehend how people actually live their lives- ‘ a structure of feelings.’¹¹

Thus Goswami provides an opening for a kind of female studies where she formulates the implications of societal causes aggravating female subordination.

Thus, Goswami firmly believes that feminism as an organized female force and strength is essentially capable of uplifting the condition of female. But still Goswami has her original, individual view about feminism for exploring woman's problems with more and more practicality and liberal attitude. She has considered woman as individuals and her concern for woman's psychological and social identity made her think of them not different from men but as human beings. Thus writing since 1970s Goswami remains an active spokesperson giving voice to various suppressed female traumas not confining her locale to Assam only. She embodies her urge to define some major approaches of female strategies with the decaying social context of Assam. The thematic variations include imposed estrangement of women under patriarchy, the marginalized definition of women as function, the patriarchal annihilation of female selfhood, woman's sense of freedom, women's concern about her torments, and the gradual carving out of female space by women through various designs.

From my analysis of Goswami's opinions about women's position in the society in her novels and short stories, it becomes clear that though Goswami is genuinely interested in women's issues she does not express her alignment with the theoreticians of feminism. Her views about woman and her treatment of the same both in short stories and novels indicate that Goswami looks at woman's issues from a distinctive standpoint. Instead of being involved in the complications of world wide women's movement , she takes her distinctive stand to project and assert the dignity of woman as human beings. From this standpoint, Goswami is both distinctive and unique. Hence her innovative themes and metaphors, in her novels and short stories to raise woman from the position of victims to position of self-assured beings.

In the next chapter I will analyze Goswami's novels and short stories with regard to the context of the of the topic to show in details how Goswami has usede the narrative structure to delineate and project her assessment of woman's situation and her vision about the status of women in the Assamese society.

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I. FOURTH CHAPTER

Relevant Works of Indira Goswami Focusing Upon the Feminist Concern with Regard to the Social and Ethical Decadence of 20th century Assamese Society.

An apt analysis of Indira Goswami's works which are subjectively related to the feminist concerns set on Assam as their locale will need to discuss a few novels, semi-fictional works, and a few short stories among her cluster of works. So for the scope and advantage of the research topic undertaken I shall remain restricted in my analysis of Goswami's works with her two novels- *The Moth Eaten Saddle of the Tusker* (*Daantal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*), *Sanskar Udaybhanur Charitra Aru Ityadi*, one semi-fictional autobiography – *Half Written Autobiography* (*Adha Lekha Dastabej*) and a few short stories like – *The Empty Chest*, *The Game of Bhairavi*, *The Journey* and *The Beast*.

Keeping the chronological order the evaluation of Goswami's works will begin with her autobiography- *Adha Lekha Dastabej* which appeared in 1988. Nandita Basu ascertains :

“Indira’s ‘half-written’ autobiography is available in English and Hindi translations. Like many of her writings, it was serialized in a journal published from Guwahati. Its most striking feature is its utter frankness and courage-which few can match- in laying bare intimate details of experience. The candour is especially remarkable for a woman publishing in Assamese, and that too in provincial – rather than a cosmopolitan – cultural environment.”¹

The autobiography begins with the recollections of Goswami’s early childhood days in Shillong during 1960s. Though that was not the proper time nor stage to account for Goswami’s growing consciousness as a female, the astounding emotional strain that remained a tremendous force working behind throughout her literary career, even at that early stage looms large mainly as an individual sense of suffering, pain and agony. The governing sense of morbidity often aroused a wish for self-annihilation and we find the same tendency to be exercised even in her later life by the author in an altogether different context of her life.

Even before leaving Shillong, Goswami recalled her growing awareness as a grown up girl and she was all of a sudden became aware of her physical

changes in an patriarch ally empowered society. Considering Goswami as the heroine of this remarkable personal narrative I shall try to emphasize upon the social constraints she had to face living in a class bound orthodox Assamese society. Her sensitivity to recognize the attractive form and shape of a female body made her aware of a different female zone where woman largely exists as a physical commodity. Besides at an early stage Goswami started building her ideas regarding love for a man from a somewhat unconventional point of view. Her admiration for the actress Lady Lemur equipped her to remember one extract from the actress's autobiography:

“I have always felt that if a man gives you a solid gold key to his door he is entitled to the courtesy of a visit.”²

Goswami's quoting this very line becomes essentially meaningful while she gathered myriad of experiences regarding friendship, love and life to charge her isolation living in different parts of the country and creating her female consciousness. It opens up a new horizon both for her readers and critics to realize her artistic female sensibility as a female writer as she bestows large heartedly her self –own female experiences among her female characters. Goswami's once remembering her fascination for ' Delilah' in the film

Samson and Delilah, focused as an immoral slut reveals Goswami's somewhat dissimilar attitude towards the identity of woman as imposingly created by the directives of society. The example is logical enough to reveal the writer's inner urge to explore the dimension of all her female characters later created by assessing their innate human dignity.

Goswami's shifting to Guwahati with her parents associated with the Assamese society proper as by birth she was connected with a cloistered Vaishnavite family background and otherwise too the society in which she was brought up in and out was unemancipated for the progressive mental and spiritual growth of a young girl. At this phase of her life she was gradually advancing towards recognizing her youthful female entity in an enlarged patriarchal world to experience love, hatred, and separation from her beloved father. As Nandita Basu points out, Goswami writes in her autobiography "...in a manner which suggests that her direct experiences of social reality are woven closely into the narrative."³

As an Assamese novelist Goswami's astounding innovation in the field of her subject-matter rests on her objectifying her own obsessive agony into her female characters and enabling them to assert their womanhood to get

triumph over her suffocating depression. Thus through objectification of her personal suffering she has the stupendous artistic capability of creating a zone where she survives by letting her female characters survive.

During her early womanhood Goswami intercepts society as an institution full of stereotype conventions which hardly offered her scope for acquiring actual assertion of female entity. As a female, Goswami as the self-protagonist of her autobiographical narrative elaborates the attitude of a harsh class-bound society of Assam where steps of a woman unconventionally taken were not offered human sympathy. Her attempt of committing suicide and bearing the scary lashes of society afterwards caused her immense trouble to survive the bloody blows forever in her memory. She was accursed, scandalized and moreover segregated as immoral by the society. Her marriage proposals were turned out and as a forlorn spinster lost hopes of getting married into a decent family. Her own family as representing the Assamese social cult dragged her more and more into the dark domain of superstition and astrology. Goswami with unfaltering spirit gives an alarming account of the horrible rituals and astrological precepts she had to go through after being castigated by an astrologer as inauspicious by birth. Goswami ruefully recollects the sacrificial ceremony offered

before Goddess Bagala (a shape of Kali) and the fresh bloody scar on her forehead, which she had to bear three more years before she came across Madhaban Ayengar, an engineer under Hindustan Construction Company in 1962. Thus the upper class Brahmin society could not project any fruitful solace to her after her psychological collapse when she used to remain confined under layers of self-doubts and morbidity than presenting before her the prospect of marriage as her ultimate goal and treating her ominous horoscope as the final testament of her hopes for survival.

Besides the ignorance and rigours of the society where she lived, Goswami too faced the endless approaches and proposals of her lovers and perhaps due to such social indignation she became a victim of social pretensions or otherwise to get rid of the continuous approaches of her enamoured admirers, she being disoriented and disintegrated succumbed to a disastrous marriage proposal and conforming to it legally signed the marriage notification, even while she was proposed by Madhaban in 1963.

Thus Goswami's daring personal excavation of her own facts of life reveals the catastrophic conflict she had to face while loving a person who had not been approved by the society to become her husband and marrying another

whom she did not love. Thus Goswami's own life becomes a glaring example of her negotiating a message how woman in the 20th century Assamese society only to get rid of the social scandals bluntly fell down into personal devastations meeting the pressures of the established system around. Eventually, the secret marriage was widely known to all and she had to pass through again an ordeal of legal hazards to finally turn the solemnized marriage null and void.

In October, 1965 Goswami was married with Madhaban and entered into a new horizon of female hood. But the boon of her conjugal life was disastrously massacred after eighteen months of their marriage, when Madhaban was killed by an accident in 1967 around his work site. Goswami's perplexing revelations of widowhood divulges in the narrative the socio-ethical dimensions of a class bound, orthodox Brahminical society of Assam that is crippled with age old worn out conventions peculiarly designed and fabricated for widows. The paper intends to interpret the portion of the narrative up to her staying in Assam after becoming widow and unfurl Goswami as the existing protagonist of her autobiography to show the social pressure that stereotypically exercised its power to bury her within its abhorring circumference.

She was offered restrictions to have food only with widows, to attend religious rituals, to live a life of sanctimonious sanctity resigning into the ritualistic formalities of the society. Goswami obviously objected against the social codes specified for the widows as she recollected some of the untold suffering of her own family members:

“The tales of one of my aunts who became widow at the age of sixteen or seventeen always whispered against my ears. She was held untouchable the day she became widow and the Brahmin women of the locality warning their daughters shouted at them –“Don’t touch, she has become widow just recently; don’t touch her.”

At the early stage of her widowhood, during menstruation she had to pass three days on a wooden bed. She had to go on unending feasts Moreover, the rituals which she had to maintain during that period were not only torturous but also unhygienic. Throughout the day she was offered only a single meal. She was one of the terrible specimen of widowhood that I have seen with my own eyes”⁴

The writer also recollects the pathetic lives of some unfortunate women-folk whom she used to know like – Yashoda, Jayanti, Deh, Satari. She narrated how Satari had been ravenously exploited by one of the Fishery official after her husband's death, how she had been turned into a beggar. Goswami feels the unsympathetic claws of the society that instead of supporting, ruins woman's life, more if she becomes a widow, and lastly in the same section of the narrative she recollects the writings of her forefathers in the will "Admissible under the act of 1903, exempted from stamp duty under Government of India's notification No.707 dated 24th January 1870"⁵ where along with the valuations of goods like doors and bells, the estimate of per maid servants like Janeki, Mahima was twelve rupees and ten annas.

Goswami's autobiography speaks less about Assam after she left for Vrindavan teaching nearly one year in Goalpara Sainik School for pursuing her research work there .

Goswami's next fictional contribution that deals with the decaying social and ethical aspects of the 20th century Assamese society with regard to female concerns is *Dantaal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah (The Moth Eaten Saddle of the Tusker)*

The novel set on an imaginative setting of a Damodaria Satra begins in the last part of the 1950s. The major portion of the important female characters with a slight touch of their concerning social status have been mentioned in the very beginning chapter of the novel –the unnamed, unexposed females of the family of Balaram Das busy playing Golokdham in late hours of the night, Gosaini, the ever anxious mother of Indranath, Durga, the widowed sister in law of Gosaini, and Giribala, the widowed sister of Indranath. The novel from its very start storms around Indranath, the male protagonist and the would be Satradhikar of Amranga Satra. Through Indra, the novelist visualizes the socio- spiritual structure of this peculiar Assamese class bound society of a Satra as well as the chaotic social mosaic which is artistically represented by the disturbed psyche of Indranath. And again it is Indranath around whom all the pangs of the suffering females are oriented.

The novelist sustains the character of Indra with the image of a full moon at midnight hour hiding behind the bamboo trees, which Indra feels no moon at all but a captured golden fish in a trap or a fair rabbit that has lost its way. Granting the moon an encompassing female entity, the author prepares the readers to examine the female predicament in the narrative in this light of

chaos and conflict. Indranath's sensing deep within him a relentless silence while returning back from Bolo's house and listening to the noise of the nocturnal birds at midnight or the flowing sound of Jagaliya; and the silence makes him feel forlorn in pangs of isolation – a pang that sources in some devastation of an established basement. Thus through Indranath, the novelist suggests the gradual dilapidation of an age old social structure as he occasionally correlates with the surrounding objective world outside. And it is again through the projection of Indranath, the author willfully sketches the canvas of patriarchy- a patriarchy that is gradually dwindling away morally and ethically and under whose domain the suffering and agonies of tortured female souls either accept the convention or lament in disdain. The social condition of the Amranga Satra as depicted by Goswami is woefully rotten and infected by the heinous habit of opium addiction, the smell of which symbolically suffocates the narrative from beginning to end, and as Indranath meditates on the houses of opium eaters in the village:

“The jagged outline of thatched huts in the deem moonlight looked like a painting of a ravaged village, laid waste by war. Out of the three hundred inmates of this village , nearly two hundred and fifty had succumbed to the snare of opium.”⁶

The narrative introduces Durga, the widowed aunt of Indra as the first female to be examined among the forlorn lot of deserted females in the text. Staying in her paternal house deserted from her in-laws, she was treated as an outcast by her In-laws, debarred from attending all sorts of religious ceremonies after she became a widow. She was considered permanently unholy due to some astrological signs. Durga's existence in the novel gives a lamentable picture of the upper class Brahmin strata in the South Kamrup district of Assam in the 50s of the 20th century. Though she was married to the renowned Gosain family of Chikarhati, the childless Durga not taken aback ever as promised by her in-laws gradually turned into a living skeleton constantly neglected and ignored by all her family members as an unwanted, evil presence. She was legally exploited too, in inheriting her property rights . Though Indra encourages Durga to prepare herself in handling the legal procedures, Durga is projected as an unaware victim of the patriarchally imposed laws of the society. She had no courage to throw away the age old convention of stricture bound life style of living only within veils of customs and superstitions and thus she had no release of her relentless sense of physical and mental exploitation.

On the other hand Saru Gossain, the widowed aunt-in-law of Indra after the demise of her husband the late Damodoria Gossain dares to live alone protecting her spiritual rights over her tenants, struggles hard to hold her lands and unconventionally enough keeps a helping partner, Mahidhar Bapu in her own vicinity.

The third chapter announces the appearance of the strongest female character in the text, Giribala, who is shown approaching her parental home as she has been brought back by her parents after becoming widow at a tender age. Here the social panorama has been vigorously sketched by the author and she leaves no leaf unturned to project the sinister welcome note that society offers to an upper class Brahmin girl when she becomes a widow. Internalizing the patriarchal impositions the women-folk of Amranga Satra torture Giri inhumanly witnessing her misery with relishing glee. She has been continuously attacked to follow the strict regulations specified for a widow, she has been reminded too, to become aware of her transformed status from a girl to a widow. Thus Goswami shows in that social purview of Amranga Satra a widow can neither live as a girl or a woman. As soon as she becomes a widow she crosses the boundary of

human life, she enters into an unknown region of unnamed identity, she remains no more human.

The chapter also reveals another unwholesome reality of the females in that specific locale South Kamrup. It reflects the psychological trauma under which the every girl lives even before her marriage. A Brahmin girl has to be married before she reaches her puberty and if she is caught otherwise, the family will be considered as outcast by the society. And as one critic assumes:

“Steeped in hoary customs and superstitions, Brahmin girls get married before the age of puberty, many are widowed at a tender age, and subjected to inhuman rigours.

Aruthless exposure of the inhuman austerities and cruelties perpetrated on Brahmin widows in an orthodox society and its outdated fossilized attitudes towards love, marriage and widowhood, *Dantaal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah* impresses one as an exceptionally bold novel where social documentation rises to heights of poetry and passion.”⁷

In this pathetic and annihilating social environment, the concern of Iliman becomes largely prominent. Indranth's enchanting infatuation for Ilimon does not remain a mere tale of romantic love, when at deep midnight surrenders before Indra through her foster mother to rescue her from a opium broker whom her father has already arranged her marriage. Moreover Iliman has kept her reaching puberty a secret from the society and as soon as it will be known to all she will not only be discarded as an outcast but also will be forcibly married to that addicted fellow with whom the arrangement of her marriage is nothing but a sinister deal by her opium addict father. The most noticeable point here is though Ilimon is a Brahmin girl, socially Indra being the son of a Satradhikar cannot marry a girl beyond the Gosain hierarchy. Such as, the budding romantic relationship between Indranath and Ilimon comes under the crush of peculiar division of class and caste and the narrative exposes the strange intricacies of social infrastructure of a particular region Assam representing the general class bound system. Thus, from a female standpoint, the chocking up of the essential human bondage by the stark, buttoned conventions undoubtedly emphasizes upon the gradual moral and ethical decadence of the society.

The episode leaves a permanent mark of female agony while Ilimon during her menstruation was standing nearby in that deep, dark, and bushy pathway of midnight and waiting for a reply from Indranath who was duly conveyed about her embarrassment by her foster mother. Such a heart provoking scene where an utterly helpless girl resigning full-heartedly to a person whom she loves to get rid of the abhorring social strictures that will annihilate her totally causes tremendous force in the text.' On the other hand Indra's passivity even being the second mentor of the locality shows his moral and ethical barrenness that hardly sustains him to deliver his duty in rescuing a desolate soul like Iliman. Thus with Indra's seeming failure to use his unsurpassable power for the betterment of another human being shows the deprivation of the social order that needless to say cracks down with its worn out norms and conventions. From the standpoint of female predicament Goswami shows how deeply the narrative is perturbed in projecting the female loss in the context of the gradual moral and ethical degeneration of the Assamese society in her fictional work.

In Daantal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah the life pattern followed by the females in the Satradhikar's family is entirely clustered around codes and

rituals which to a large extent are pathetically abominable. As another critic points out :

“The Assamese Satras, which have contributed immensely to the religious and cultural life of Assam.....what strikes me particularly is not the external history of the Satras,but the complex internal history of the Satras involving the suffering of men and women involved with them. That history is told through the lives of women, most of them denied of all pleasures of life, struggling frantically to negotiate with the social codes, and waiting like animals to be slaughtered, for death , their ultimate end.”⁸

As in the fifth chapter of the novel the character of a foreigner called Mark Sahib is introduced who has come to Amranga Satra to do research on the Satra culture. Though he was duly honoured and accepted by the Satradhikar's family, his shadow falling on Durga immediately made her haste over to the well for taking another bath to purify herself because of her both being a widow and belonging to the Gosain clan. Living within such obsessions and outrageous customs, the female characters grow a peculiar psycho-spiritual consciousness which is almost impossible to decipher through reason, rationality and vision of realization. The three major widows

in the novel have been projected by Goswami from their three different existential standpoints. Giribala refusing to live the specified cloistered life appropriated by the society even encouraged by her brother Indra accompanies Mark Sahib in translating manuscripts. Durga surrenders totally to all the atrocities of the formidable society and lives a life as good as death. Saru Gosain, Indra's aunt-in-law exercises her power and esteem to attain her due social status inferred to her by her deceased husband, the second supreme of Amranga Satra. Being a widow, though she maintains all the customary rites like avoiding cooked food, confining her body as impious to a specific area, not moving around day time and such others during her menstruation she can not help feeling a strong physical desire for Mahidhar Bapu, the person who has been sheltered to look after her property and sharecroppers.

In the cases of both Giribala and Saru Gosain as earlier in the case of Iliman, Goswami designs the same pattern of inconclusive love affair respectively with Mark Sahib, Mahidhar Bapu and Indranath. The depicted society like a waste land does not germinate and nurture the saplings of love and even it does the loss is inevitable. As Prof. Hiren Gohain observes :

“But the most gruesome image of human degradation and suffering is the fate of the young Brahmin widows, two daughters of the preceptor (Gosain) and his sister-in-law. They are deprived by callous feudal patriarchs, driven by both greed and custom, of their share in property, their right to decent livelihood, and last vestige of their self-respect. Racked by overwhelming and unfulfilled physical longings, mortified by the ascetic penances imposed on them, tortured by nightmares of guilt and fear, driven by their urges and dreams to desperate remedies and disastrous solutions, they are ground to dust by the grinding wheel of the system.”⁹

Thus the serpentine social frame and the self-exercised exploitative modes of life constantly demolish the desire how much unnatural may it be in coming into the natural course of flourishing and fulfillment. Widows are made to consider their desire for males outside their horizon of life as impious, filthy and even immoral. They are continuously self-tortured by thinking about penances they should go through even for thinking about them beside the memories of their deceased husband. For example, Saru Gosain asks pardon from her lord, she senses the thought obnoxious, she shudders as if she has fallen in infernal damnation for her feeling for Mahidhar Bapu. She even resolves to go through a total clearing including

her utensils as she feels moral stagnation within. On the other hand Iliman's spiritual existence, her emotional cravings, her female anxiety, and her insecurity are not sympathetically watched out and she has been relentlessly projected as a female body, subjugated before the clamouring crowd as an object. Her reaching puberty, the source of her female strength and identity, though well guarded is enough to scandalize her social status as it was customary to arrange marriage for a girl child before she reaches that stage in the South Kamrup region of Assam even in the middle of the 20th century. Though Indra was gallant enough arranging the opium trader, with whom Iliman's father has arranged her marriage, got caught by the deputed volunteers, he could not forsake his honour, status, and title as the Satradhikar's son to come forward and hold Iliman's hand. The projected society's class structure is knotty that even being a Brahmin, Iliman was not socially acknowledged appropriate enough to enter into the Gosain household. Thus, the intricately formulated division even between same class as higher and lower led Iliman's life to inconclusive oblivion. Indranath's inability to discard the lethargy of custom, though he has been presented as the single sensible character in the text, profoundly upright and protector of morality, and come forward boldly and hold Iliman's hand makes her suffer intolerably and leaves her a destitute.

Likewise, Giribala was severely punished while tasting cooked meat on the occasion of her grandfather, late Mahaprabhu's death anniversary, rejecting the ascertained compulsive vegetarian food permitted for widows. Giri's uncherished memories of her lecherous husband, Latu Gosain, whose frank declaration of his various affairs with several low-caste women and his saying the same to her in the very first night of their wedding left a permanent mark in Giri's psyche to not exhibit any kind of respect to that man maintaining the prescribed austerities to be followed by a widow. Thus her proceeding for that forbidden act like stealthily eating meat suggestively emphasizes on the fact how Giri has protested against the patriarchy. Giri was amazingly enough caught red handed tasting the irresistible, delicious item by her own aunt, another widow confined within taboos of conventions. Giri was brutally beaten as Durga makes the fact known to all and had to undergo a process of penance.

Giribala's growing fascination for Mark Sahib remains another thwarted chain of passion. Though Giribala's constant staying close to him lets him understand her feelings and urges absolutely clear, he has not been presented as a chivalrous male to rescue her from the dungeon of sacrifice. Mark remains as hesitant and shadowy as Indranath in the context of Giribala's

relation with him because it is Giribala who has been sketched out as an agonized soul beside the foil of Mark.

Giribala reveals her true mental and psychological status through two penetrating images. She miserably harassed and abused recedes to her room. Though she was consoled by Mark with his spiritual wisdom, Giri correlates her non- existential existence, in Mark's mind with the wooden structure of the room where she has been put into or again the wooden cell correlates with the lifeless social cauldron that has annihilated Giri's strong desire for Mark, her constant wish to forgo her widowed limitations and also her spontaneous feeling of sensing the gradual impropriety of the regulations and restrictions structured by the society- a society within which Giri feels she feels as if " she has been lying suffocated inside a wooden box". Giribala has a similar type of illusory feeling when she finds the texture of the colourful umbrella, once used to welcome her husband when he was a groom, suddenly as smooth as the skin of Mark. Giri's such illusory replacement of adoration from her husband whom she never loved to Mark, shows her gradually re-establishing him in the position of her husband and her finally whispering to herself to bring her out from the wooden box

suggestively stands for the worn out patriarchal confinement destined to a widow.

Thus , Giribala's surmounting urge to live, to love and to affirm her non-victim status do not get affirmative reciprocation from the society she inhabits, as the society as projected by Goswami has set, formulized prescriptions for different segments of the female class as widows, spinsters, Brahmin high class and low class females, mediocre females and such others. The society being far from an organic unity plays a disastrous role as a weapon to cut short their lives. But Giribala's growing attraction for Mark and her wish to achieve her freedom in his arms was curtailed by the social order. " ...news of their intimacy however gradually spread and the family of her deceased husband became concerned about the reputation of their house. A daughter-in-law of a reputed orthodox family cannot be allowed to hobnob with an infidel foreigner. Messengers were sent to take Giribala back to her husband's home".¹⁰

Before describing the self-slaughtered end of Giribala, Goswami with same ruthless vigour narrates the painful disillusionment of both Durga and Saru Gossaini " ...polluted by religious superstitions and meaningless ritualistic

activities".¹¹ Durga's last wish of fulfillment lies with her desire to visit Puridham on a pilgrimage to perform the last rites of her deceased husband. But that last wish too of a widow "...neurotic and unconsciously perverse because of crushed sexuality"¹² appears futile when she finds the last earthly possession of her, a box of ornaments kept under the bed of Saru Gossaini missing, probably stolen by Mahidhar Bapu, whom she has allowed to live in her out house to look after her rent and property and for whom she bears a tremendous passion.

Thus the novelist prepares the story line to frame the next fact of the lopsided values of Mahidhar, whose intricately woven plans of deceiving Saru Gossaini come into direct conflict with her honestly felt passionate urges for the man. Mahidhar's intention of exploiting Saru Gossaini's material possession is nothing significant in comparison to his crushing her affection for him and as one critic observes:

"Her gentle dreams of sexual longings were woven round this man; her infatuation made her blind to his designs, and occasionally she suffered from great anxieties thinking of his well-being" and finally found
"..... Mahidhar, caught while he was trying to sell younger Mrs. Goswami's

land on a forged letter of authority from her. A shattering end to her dream.”¹³

The final ghastly blow with a concern to female concern at the background of the decaying ‘moth-eaten’ structure of society is presented in the final section of the novel. Giribala disregarding the social dictum instructed by her in-laws to drag her by the hair if she was unwilling to return back rushed to Mark’s room defying a heavy downpour deep at midnight. Drenched all through Giri with all her physical charm and enchantment only confuses Mark who was not at all ready to give her the shelter she was in utter need. Mark stunned and appalled appeals to her “You are breaking a tradition of generations of your family; please go back home”.¹⁴ Giribala passed the entire night at Mark’s chamber though was not touched or consoled by her even for once. The next morning Giri was found inside Mark’s room and dragged outside by the family priest for persecution as she was charged with adultery. The process through which Giri had to pass for her purgation of sin envisaged a course of penance and precincts typical to the Saatradhikar household. She was led inside a hut usually used for the burnt-offering of goat during Holi festival by the villagers accompanied by the priest for the penance to be observed. “ Amidst chanting of purificatory mantra, they set

fire to the shed with the instruction to Giribala that she should come out of it when the fire engulfed the it. But to their dismay, the fire soon engulfed the shed ; and yet Giribala did not come out. The whole shed with Giribala inside it was burnt to ashes; and Indranath had to be a silent spectator to it.”¹⁴

Thus Giribala reverses the practice of *sutee* as in “the practice of widow immolating herself at the death of her husband had its origin in superstitions, ignorance and the blind egotism of man”¹⁵. Her self-immolation symbolically stands as a protest of burning down the course of female oppression shown in the novel.

And finally we can conclude by saying that “Of course, the writer herself is liberal enough to show how this orthodoxy which is the stronger trend in the present society is still decadent and self-destructive.”¹⁶

Goswami’s next work of fiction relevant in the context of female concern at the backdrop of decaying moral and ethical values is her short novel, *Sanskar* from the collection of novels known as *Sanskar Udaybhanur Charitra Aru Ityadi*.

In Sanskar, the central female character, Damayanti, a Brahmin widow lives the life of a prostitute to earn her livelihood. She has been approached by the aged, childless Pitambar Mahajan only to help him in continuing his progeny by bearing a child by him. Damayanti is a militant protagonist who has the habit of aborting unborn fetuses as she does not wish to give birth to any of the lives she has so far conceived. The birth of a child will be an eternal stigma to her character as she can not become a mother being a widow. The society can grant her to live as a prostitute but it will not sanction her bearing a child of an unidentified father source. Perhaps, because of this Damayanti keeps the capacity to destroy even if it is an unborn foetus exclusively to herself. She exercises her womb as her only means of weapon to declare female freedom and assertiveness. Damayanti finally agrees to marry Pitambar to finally lean upon a male, but Pitambar is aged and lower in caste than Damayanti's. She frustrates Pitambar's hope by taking the same measure of aborting his child too and the entire narrative revolves round the awful, stigmatized act of foetus killing action of Damayanti which by all means reflects a distorted, infected and abhorring identity of a society that has no value left for sustaining Damayanti with normal human benevolence. Thus, though Damayanti conceives Pitambar's

child in her womb, she ultimately kills it keeping her peculiar female entity intact. On the other hand Pitambar has failed in becoming father notwithstanding having married two times. One of them died and the other one is sinking under the virus of rheumatism. Damayanti would be the third woman to make good his zeal for a child. Here Pitambar's sense of use of a woman is comically presented when Damayanti carrying his successor ripped it in the bud. He looks a scarecrow when Krishnakanta, the mediator of the negotiation between Damayanti and Pitambar, conveys this news to him. Apart from all possible aspects this helpless situation of a man before a self-willed woman is the foundation of the story. The feminist emphasis lies there. Without forwarding love, honour, morality or justification of belongingness the society projected has turned woman a receptacle for holding roots and germs for the fulfillment of the patriarchal need. The pattern of the novel is full of urges primitive as well as archetypal. This is a very obsessive pattern which substantiates a basic male banality which tends to appropriate a woman for progeny alone. Such as, the novel emphasizes more on the character of Pitambar that represents a hollow, worn out social pattern where women are from ages onwards meant for satisfying patriarchal wish of giving birth to child and otherwise too, Damayanti's excessive behaviour of destroying a basic female instinct correlates with Giribala's act

of self-immolation in the preceding novel as a mark of desystematising the offensive system of social oppression against women in the context of the 20th century Assamese society as documented by Goswami. Damayanti reverses the stereotype ideas bequeathed to a woman where all along women have been seen as being a source of life. As the observation goes :

“Even though the word ‘Shakti’ stands for strength or power, in the Indian psyche, it symbolizes the ideal of woman. The irony in this situation is that the power of Shakti has rested in her powerlessness. She has been an all-sacrificing, all-giving, benevolent, de-sexualised, de-humanised female image.”¹⁷

She dares to come out the conceptualized impression of a traditional mother image and stands vindictive against the set social signature.

The paper with a short overview will like to trace the same line of female concern in the context of a few stories by Goswami. In the story called *The Game of Bhairabi* , Goswami focuses upon another aspect of social atrocity upon women exercised by the orthodoxy. Padmapriya, the protagonist is returned back to her parents as a damaged baggage after being married to

Bhubaneswar, a man of knowledge and learning. Her father, the poor priest, Bhagawati married his daughter hoping in a helpless manner that she would be protected and secured. But she was rejected by her in-laws as they discovered a spot on her body. The capricious step taken by Padma's in-laws all at once turns her life into utterly futile and the female existence here at this point stands merely as a bodily object rejected as a rotten object due to one physical deformity. And suddenly Padma's course of life takes a repulsive twist as she comes across Sambhudev who performs sacrifices in the temple practicing his attempts regularly with watergourds in the mighty river Brahmaputra. Padma gradually gets involved with Sambhudev's bold and active creative male aura and one day enters into a cave with him for plucking flowers. Inside the cave they cross all boundaries of social norms. Sambhudev unlike Bhubaneswar welcomes Padma's ardent female identity and does not bother about her spot, the social stigma attached to her. The text leaves suggestions enough to mark Sambhudev as a personification of the river Brahmaputra with all his natural associations and Padma too feels herself resourceful in the refuge of him. Moreover the narrative has in details sketched out the process of animal sacrifice and Padma's ghastly protest against the ritualistic sacrifice and the image of the tortured buffalo brought for sacrifice to a large extent portrays her own stand after the marital

crisis. Goswami through images and symbols surrounding the story maintains a social pattern where woman like Padma is projected as good as a helpless animal brought for slaughter if she fails to satisfy the patriarchal social code as a female as here in the case of Padma as a healthy wife.

Goswami has purposefully woven an erogenous vision by exploring the idyllic spot leading to the cave-“.....a flock of wild geese....a slap-slap aound of their wings mingled with the slapping sound of oars...Padmapriya rushed along the overgrown paththrough the thick shrubbery and the overhanging creepers...”¹⁸ Sambhudev sitting under a tamarind tree, shaping his knife represents the essence of masculinity crystalised and lodged itself within his body. Symbolically enough Sambhudev assists Padma to unfold her innate yearning to offer her blood to Devi Kamakhya while Sambhudev releases her from captivity both spatial and psychological heretofor frosted on the social plane. Goswami ironically turns Padma into a Bhairabi, a Devi if not a socially acclaimed female figure.

Lavanya, Padma's childhood friend finally arranges Padma's meeting with Bhubaneswar who has come after a long interval to join Bhanumati's wedding. According to Lavanya's direction Padmapriya meets

Bhubaneswar with all her majesty and beauty of physicality and lets her body speak .Padmapriya being a new woman vanquishes Bhubaneswar. The spot that had ruled the mind rather than the body receded to the background. While she is unrobbing herself to demonstrate the harmless spot he is captivated by Padma's 'molten gold' skin. Bhubaneswar is determined to take back Pamapriya. And this is the moment of positive victory of a forlorn woman which she has to attain by the application of her feminine glory and she has won back Bhubaneswar.

But the story also relates Padma's vibrating protest against the society that has castigated her by the ordeal of torture and humiliation. After receiving public commitment from her husband that he will receive her as his wife Padma, though Bhubaneswar has reason to believe that he is the father of the unborn baby of Padma, unfolds the fact that her embryo's progenitor was none but the mystic Sambhudev.

Thus, Padmapriya sacrifices her belated conjugal happiness for the sake of deliverance of her gender. She snatches away the magic-box of illusion from Bhubaneswar by appropriating her thunder like truth. She is apathfinder, a 'Bhairabi' whose unconscious will paves the way of happiness for all

unfortunate women who are victims of the state of mind dominated by the exaggerated pride in being male. This is the suggestion of feminism which Goswami gives crude success. Be that as it may the late 20th century, in the steep decadence of earlier values woman needs some sort of militancy to grab life out of the garbage of loosening moral fabric. And again unlike her novels Goswami builds the character of Padmapriya asserting her femalehood as a creative non-victim at the background of a society which is morally and ethically degraded.

The chapter will finally examine another more short story by Goswami showing the similar pattern of female predicament as discussed in the earlier observations. In the story *The Empty Chest*, the leading female character Taradoi is portrayed as a haggard, skeletal being, married, mother of two children and forlorn as her husband is in prison having charges of murder against him. Asusual in Indian society Taradoi faces the same sense of insecurity socially and morally as a helpless woman, ever tensed and afraid of the patriarchal world who can at any time attempt to abuse her sexuality. She has been portrayed living under the pangs of unbearable poverty, no one to look after her and on the verge of loosing her virtue as a female.

Taradoi is Goswami's another representation of a helpless Assamese female existing palpably between the chances of remaining pure physically with the title of a wife and the constant approaches of other male, Haibor of turning into a prostitute. The story from the very beginning announces its climax as Taradoi finds the warmth of masculine care and affection neither in the lasting wait of the former nor in the practical necessity of the later for the sake of earning a livelihood but in the wooden coffin that she has brought inside her shack from the cremation ground.

The psychological rapture with which the writer entangles Taradoi's female crazy cravings with the empty blood stained box is profoundly symbolic showing a combination of female passion and lust for life on Taradoi's part. The empty coffin stands for her lost love demolished by the heavy norms of society as it is the coffin of Saru Bapu, the son of Thakur who promised her to marry but could not as being a high class member of the society he was not allowed to marry a girl of a lower caste and class. And so the empty coffin is not just an empty box of any dead body, for her it is the presence of the person whom she loved and who was killed in an accident and brought to the crematorium packed inside this coffin. The man was cremated but she has possessed the bow with all her deserted might.

Just then the social norms speaks in the form of a character, Someswar , a policeman and also Taradoi's brother who comes to her shack to enquire about the coffin which fact has become an interesting piece of news-gossip around the locality. He unfurls Taradoi's emotional hegemony by insisting on the false promise by Saru Bapu when he was enamoured by his sister, harshly pointing out to the cleavage of class difference between them. Goswami here makes a point of showing how society even it has been documented in the context of the 20th century Assamese society, disregards the essential bond of human relationship like love between two young souls as it is too disfigured and fabricated with the intricacies of conventions and set rules to sympathise with human affection. Someswar laughs at Taradoi's foolishness and audacity to desire for a man who belonged to the Thakur family and her psychic passion of pursuing after the long lost love which now she attempts to achieve caressing the enormous box. Taradoi's one last belief of Saru Bapu's loyalty towards their unfulfilled relationship, of his remaining bachelor until the last day of his life is likewise disrupted when Someswar announces the finalization of his marriage ceremony throwing a few invitation cards to her face. The inert, intact conviction of Taradoi is straightway marooned irreparably as she has lost not the person or the box

representing his essence but the precious of all, her genuine love though not secured by a nuptial lock but by a deep conviction of Saru Bapu's preserving emotion for her when he was alive.

Thus the social dimension as mostly sketched over like in earlier writings of Goswami discussed in this paper brings a sense of suffocation and the empty chest no longer remains just a mere wooden box but the machinery called society that engulfs Taradoi eternally. The societal disapproval of Taradoi's marriage with Saru Bapu and the social hypocrisy on the part of Saru Bapu even when he is dead cast a ruthless shadow on Taradoi's mind and the male allurements behind the shack prepares Taradoi only to face a world where females when they are helpless and deserted only succumb to physical and spiritual damnation and annihilation.

Thus the few relevant works discussed in this chapter establish the originality and distinctiveness of Goswami's approach towards the question of woman's identity in the context of twentieth century Assam. Thus Goswami showing mostly the exploited condition of women in the region around from higher class to down trodden strata of the society advocates for the need of emancipation of woman not only from domination of man but

also from her own negative compulsions that have been formed through the age old customs and conventions in the male dominated society.

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FIFTH CHAPTER

CONCLUSION

In her fictions, short-stories and other semi-fictional narratives Indira Goswami projects the idea of female issues in the context of female victimization in twentieth century Assam. Goswami's novelty in establishing an original feminist tradition of her own chiefly rests on her fictions dealing with socio-cultural issues chiefly outlined by an essential woman character. Regarding Goswami's novelty as a writer speaking on woman's issues Prof. D. K. Baruah points out :

“In fact most of her novels are centered round tragic protests of women to affirm their right to self-fulfillment in a repressive world of suffocating socio-religious conventions and of predatory men. In this she is a feminist writer though she uses a wider canvas and enriches her plot with many socio-cultural issues. But the essential dynamism of her plots is invariably derived from a central woman character. For the first time in Assamese literature we come across a female writer who has brought

authentic news of the other side of the human heart which is so much obfuscated by convention, repression and stereotypes.”¹

Goswami is essentially an Assamese author highlighting the issue of female victimization in an Assamese context. The social dimension of her works occasionally lead critics to consider her as a humanitarian. In an interview with Puravee Kalita regarding her adherence to any kind of definite idealism effecting her feelings, she welcomes the note of humanitarianism as observed by others in her works:

“Thanks for feeling my works to be humanitarian. I always feel a certain wish that these people----who have faced such a hellishly torment some life---could be saved from their pain: that such states of the society that inflicts those torments, could be destroyed.”²

In her early semi-fictional autobiography Goswami deals with her first stages of awareness of realizing the patriarchal world and the nature of man, grasping all her experiences as the living standards to learn the first lessons of examining the society around.

“...We watch her grow, in her early years, into womanhood. ‘I grew aware of my figure out day by day...At the age of twelve, my breasts has grown so much that I was terribly embarrassed when my father saw me taking a bath naked in my bathroom...’ It is with the same fierce transparency that she says after losing her husband in an accident. “Who can determine how the abrupt end of a happy conjugal life affects the poor wife?...” It is during her widowhood that she discovers that the measure of animality in man, was much more than in woman. It is this type of lecherous male that she encounters in Vrindavan. “The City of God”, where man, in the barb of priest and saint, seeks only the flesh of women, especially the helpless young widows who frequent these places of worship in quest of spiritual solace. Helplessly, Indira cries out... Indeed, it is not easy to understand, a man’s cruel nature....”³

Goswami’s *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* set in a typical Assamese monastic institution, the *Sattra* dominated by decaying patriarchal and social conventions becomes a true saga of female outcry. Otherwise too, Goswami has a visionary solicitude of responding to endless traumas of the humanity. She is a relentless spokesperson of advocating the trials of day to day life and even the predicaments of all classes of the society in her narratives.

“She responds with horror, outrage and burning pity, to the expanding desert in human relations—the loveless marital life, excruciating urban solitude, pitiless idealism degenerating into terrorism, and thick callousness to immense suffering all around. At the same time, the rising tide of protest and rebellion against centuries old bondage, oppressions and deceit, evokes an answering echo in her soul.”⁴

The paper going to examine the novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah* of the Tusker as a female saga of exploitation and suffering has not discussed many social upheavals in view of shortage of scope with a regard to the relevance with the stated topic and concentrating mainly on those facts illustrating female atrocities. Besides the other female characters, Giribala, the heroine of the novel, Durga, the virtually treated outcast in the family, Saru Gossaini, Iliman, or Indranath's mother are shown more or less ineffective and unaware of their subjugated roles in the male dominated society. Their uneasiness at their incomplete and unsatisfied confidence as women becomes clear through their thoughts and activities. Besides Giribala, all the other females did not struggle to affirm their female space and existence and Giribala's affirmation too comes through a symbolic self-destructive action. The social umbrella is such all-encompassing that except

Giribala to an extent hardly a female in the novel has attained the autonomy of thought, self-definition, self-realization, and creative response to reject the male dominated culture and refuse to accept their delimiting roles as victims.

Goswami emphasizes the urgent need to transcend the conventional female range by focusing upon the danger of female annihilation mostly in the text to resist the social norm of femininity. She constantly feels the pressure of her female characters and so keeps on giving the task to her readers to investigate the decaying moral and ethical background of the society, where chiefly the victim position originate. Goswami presents governing images, symbols, and metaphors throughout the novel to highlight the confined and categorized position of females. If the house, the room, the cell where they reside symbolize the caged status of the women in the novel, then the wilderness, the nature outside sustains them with sense of female worth. Iliman conveys her message of love towards Indranath in deep midnight covered with wilderness around. Giribala threw herself in the arms of MarkSahib when she was traveling with him outside and terrified by the deadly scene created by the rampant elephant . Saru Gossaini waits and longs for Mahidhar at night outside drenched by the pouring rain. And the

enveloping symbol of the catastrophic society in the novel without mentioning which the arguments can not come to any conclusion is the incremental reference of the family elephant on *musth*. And it is highly suggestive that the howdah of this tusker has been totally damaged and left disused in the Saatradhikar household. Representing the worn out superstructure of the society, the society fails to orient and sustain people's lives around being totally disintegrated with its illogical ethos and concepts as much like the *musth* elephant, Jagannath. Goswami provides the most meaningful aspect of the text by showing the inevitable end of the elephant for the survival of the people of the locality, which in a broad sense is also the inescapable culmination of the defunct social creed which she only can visualize. As Dr. Gobinda Prasad Sharma states:

“The tradition of the society against which the novel has been a protest is the Assamese feudal and religious tradition.

The Worm-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker is set in the house of the Adhikar (abbot of a Vaisnavite Sattrā (monastery) in a village in the southern bank of the district of Kamrup. How the religious conservatism in this house has suppressed thoughtlessly the human instinct and wishes of man, especially

women-----thus allowing religion to go against humanity, is very well shown."⁵

Goswami's next novel examined in this chapter, *Sanskar* again falls apart resolving the question of female existence, her sense of determination in a society that neither restores Damayanti when she diverts the ascertained role of a pious widow nor approves her bold though cruel action of aborting unborn fetuses to remain unblemished from her strong caste prejudice. Throughout the story Damayanti has been depicted as a bodily presence only and Pitambar assesses her beauty always in terms of physical organs or as a female body. She is important both to Pitambar and Krishnakanta as a suitable reproductive organ and arranging the negotiation between Pitambar and Damayanti, Krishnakanta enables his selfish monetary gain while Pitambar only wants to secure Damayanti's womb for the continuation of his hereditary line.

The patriarchal mode of female subordination which is again the result of an age old, stubborn moral and ethical set up of a society is present in the text from the very beginning when Pitambar rejects his second wife because of her incapability of giving birth to a child. Pitambar's longing for a male-

child is undoubtedly is a patriarchal fantasy for the fulfillment of which he uses Damayanti as a reproductive machine. The social exploitation reaches its height when Krishnakanta even ever prejudiced by the strands of castism welcomes Pitambar's wish to possess Damayanti and echoing the falsely felt ethos of Gandhism even overlooks the gap of caste between them. Krishnakanta chastises Damayanti---- "When she rejects Pitambar on grounds of caste, Krishkanta threatens to make public her sexual activities and openly targets her vulnerability as a widow: "...if you do not save yourself from sin by taking hold of this chance, you will surely burn in the hell-fires".⁶

Goswami's three short stories discussed in this chapter show the general characteristics of this genre being more suggestively affirmative in their presentation and agile in given metaphorical pattern. The Game of Bhairabi is closely knit by the symbolic pattern of animal sacrifice and the protagonist Padmapriya's severe reaction against it and such as Padma's apparent existence in the text as a rejected female at the mercy of the patriarchally framed world and her negating the conventional morale through twisting female design to avenge the malicious ethics around is

astoundingly innovative so far as theme and structure of the story is concerned. The story is again a strong example of exposing the aspect of eco-feminism in the bulk of Goswami's creative writing. Loosing her status judged by the conventional worth of a healthy female, Padmapriya enriches herself spiritually as well as mentally entering into , roaming and frequently visiting Nature and its wilderness. She regenerates herself to defend her female assertiveness assimilating her self-hood with nature, which is feminine, inartificial and productive and the male-figure who restores Padma's wounded female psyche is more a mythical, river born entity and akin to the mighty river Brahmaputra, slicing the symbolic melons remaining deep inside the river. Thus in Goswami's projections, society remains more a symbolic superstructure and the narrative in each story is governed by a strong, all-encompassing symbol. In the story, The Empty Chest, the governing symbol is the symbol of crematorium from which Taradoi, the protagonist lifts the empty coffin and grasps at a failing reality. The emptiness of the coffin marks symbolically the barranness of the moral and ethical regulations entitled for a female in the

society and Taradoi realizes the true status of her entity when her brother focuses upon the false impression of Saru Bapu who is dead and justifies the falsity of the patriarchal promises before Taradoi.

Thus in the few works cited in relevance to the topic of the project undertaken, Goswami employs innovative devices and conventions to project women's concerns and problematics. She has evolved novel methods of narrative art to verbalize her concept of women's subordination in the background of orthodox ethical and moral purview. The author has succeeded in developing a tradition of her own to speak about female sufferings. In the backdrop of the history of Assamese novel before Goswami, the author thus has made her unique contributions that place her in the front rank of twentieth century Assamese writers. In her long prolific literary career, Goswami has experimented in various forms of poetry, novels, and short stories to figure out woman's ground reality in the context of the society. According to Goswami woman cannot be regarded by the age-old patriarchal concepts like self-sacrificing, all

accepting, exploited beings in distress like suffering housewives, male-seeking maidens or domestic stereotypes. The author constantly hints at the necessity of their emergence as females to define their mode of expression. Rajul Sogani asserts Goswami's essence of attitude towards female cause:

“She has observed at close quarters the systematic, institutionalized and cruel oppression of women who have lost their husbands and consequently their appointed place in the family and community. She does not offer any reformist solutions to their problems nor does she express any hostility towards their oppressors or the sympathizers who are unable to fight the system and give them relief. As an artist she brings into sharp focus the pity and the horror of their situation and above all, the intense desire in each one of these caged birds to come out of its prison, if not to fly, at least to breath the fresh air of life and sing its own song. How long will society force them to languish in isolation or perhaps court violent and premature death? The question is still to be answered.”⁷

Through her works Goswami adds a new dimension to the growth of Assamese novel. No one before her so cogently hammered on the exploration into the status of woman in the Assamese society in the fictional form. She has not only investigated into the victim position of woman in the Assamese society but also invented the several layers of male domination of woman subordinated to a patriarchal system of authority. Though other writers of the same have delved into the psyche of Assamese women. But Goswami's method of story telling is more complicated and sophisticated to match her multi-pronged probing into the status of woman in the victim position in the context of the decaying moral and ethical set-up in Assam during the twentieth century. Thus I may confidently conclude that Goswami has presented a perfect but disturbing literary epitome of her singular understanding of woman's position in the highly innovative narrative works. Her feminist approaches are singular and distinctive, hence they have made a matchless contribution to the growth of modern Assamese novel.

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